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# In and about the Maximus Poems

Sherman Paul

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comes nearly anonymous, like the scraps of printed matter in a Schwitters collage or the *disjecta membra* of a Cornell box (the “surreal serendipity”) floating between the ultimately arbitrary and the ultimately determined. A sharp dialectic of freedom and obsession energizes the poems; in spite of their desire to be objects, they retain numinous possibilities. For all their playfulness, the poems finally do affirm a set of values, or at least by reflecting certain values in their high resplendence, offer an allowance of affirmation without ever urging it. These values, of course, are insouciance and improvisation: though the poems want an objective structure, a clear architecture, they yet, inescapably it would seem, act out of a boundless trust of their own nerve. Hearing so many words and phrases that could apply to O’Hara’s poetry—pragmatic, Adamic, individualistic, insane energies revolving around a calculated center, for sale and yet priceless—it should be no wonder if we settle for calling them, and also judging them, as completely American.

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CRITICISM / SHERMAN PAUL

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## In and About the Maximus Poems\*

### II *The Maximus Poems 11-22*

Yes, as Paul Blackburn complained, he twists:

He sd, “You go all around the subject.”  
And I sd, “I didn’t know it was a sub-  
ject.” He sd, “You twist” and I sd,  
“I do” . . .

In what follows in “Letter 15,” Olson tells us that his poem will not make us comfortable. It does not follow a linear track (to a foreseen destination) and its songs or letters are woven together (“Rhapsodia”: *Greek*, songs stitched together). Subjects have definition, have boundaries, and are fields claimed by scholars—“academics” is Olson’s pejorative word. And Olson, who boasted “je suis un ecolier” when instructing Cid Corman in the high value of scholars like Robert Barlow, Carl Sauer, and Frederick Merk, is certainly not a scholar of the academic kind. He recognizes no boundaries; the field he enters is not a subject but the reality he fronts, a place of attentions. His subject, if he may be said to have one, is man-within-the-field; that, and the twisting of his own self-action.

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\* The first section of this essay, *The Maximus Poems 1-11*, appeared in *TIR* 6/1 (Winter, 1975).

This explains both the small amount of early American history and the way in which Olson presents it. "Letter 10" and the transition to Captain John Smith in "Letter 11" seem to promise extended historical treatment, but *Maximus* is not a historical poem and history of that kind is ancillary to the history, the present acts, of the poet. His concerns in this installment, all of it written in the spring of 1953, are continuous with those of volume I: origins (those of Gloucester and his own), the difficulties of his stance (compounded as they are by the divorce of economics and poetry and his revulsion from present-day America), *tropos* and the honor that accords with it. More historical material of the period of discovery and colonization enters this installment than the earlier one, but also more personal material of childhood. There is a stronger erotic undercurrent, and, most conspicuous, the incorporation of dreams (another boundary denied). Which is to say that in making the poem—living in and extending its field—the poet finds himself increasingly liberated and aware, capable of using hitherto neglected aspects of his experience.

How to act is a central motive binding the historical past to his own present concerns with the making of his poem and with honor. The epigraphic verse of "Letter 14" states it: ". . . on the puzzle / of the nature of desire [desire is later defined in tropic terms: "to tend to move / as though drawn"]"; ". . . on how men do use / their lives. . . ." John Hawkins, notable in this instance, is an example of misusing one's life—is one of several representative historical figures, John Smith, Nathaniel Bowditch, Stephen Higginson, in this installment. Hawkins "broke open / the Spanish main" to slave trading, with consequences in war and later in Gloucester "for some of those who built / white houses"; Bowditch, founder of insurance companies, "represents . . . that movement of NE monies / away from primary production & trade"; and Higginson, a member of Congress in the early Republic, trafficked in arms—and disparaged the fishermen of Gloucester who, for Olson, engage in primary production, the true source of wealth. These figures serve as nodes for Olson's profound sense of the betrayal of the New World and for his outrage with the present begotten by it—an outrage, incidentally, now variously and openly expressed in the contrapuntal response to Sir Richard Hawkins' statement of intent, in the punning on pejorocracy in "Letter 16" on Bowditch and Higginson ("What you have my town, what all towns / now have: pee-jaw-rock- / Cressy!"), and in the oath provoked by Higginson's letter to Vice-President Adams ("the son of a bitch").

Captain John Smith is the great exemplary figure in this and subsequent installments. He is mentioned in *Maximus 1-10* but only now enters the poem, significantly in the poet's recollection of childhood in "Letter 11." This poem, like the preceding one, addresses the founding of Gloucester, and it involves the poet's founding, his childhood play in Stage Fort Park

and the way "Historie [the romance of it is in the archaic spelling] / come bang [as it is visually presented here] into the midst of / our game!" The rock with which the poem begins is not, as one might tentatively assume, that commemorating the more familiar but different venture of the Pilgrims at Plymouth; it is Tablet Rock, commemorating Roger Conant's arbitration of incipient conflict between Captain Hewes of the fishermen settled at Gloucester by the Dorchester Company and Captain Miles Standish of the Plymouth Colony, a focal episode for Olson, who returns to it in third installment. It is focal because "was it puritanism, / or was it fish?" is the historical question he wishes to answer. But it is also focal because it took place where Olson tells us he is founded. And what is of unusual interest in the initial verses are the personal components of the ideogram they compose: his memory of childhood, his concern with his father's burial, which he would have otherwise for the sake of his nativity, and his declaration that "a man's life / . . . is what there is." History is biography (his story), the story of a man's life; hence his remark, "how I got to / what I say." And it is a family matter, as in his treatment of William, John, and Richard Hawkins, a story of father and sons—the sons, in this case, not as worthy as the father. His own life, then, and his father's too, are history, rightful, related elements of his poem.

The John Smith of Olson's childhood is the romantic figure who had adventured in Hungary and Transylvania and had named Cape Ann "Tragabigzanda" after a Turkish princess. He is a figure of pageant, of "Historie," and Olson vividly recollects the wonder of his appearance in his childhood game even as he tells from his adult perspective Smith's unusual achievements as a discoverer. This account of childhood has erotic color and echoes Williams' passage on the lovers in the park in *Paterson II* and Crane's evocation of Smith in *The Bridge* ("There was Priscilla's cheek close in the wind, / And Captain Smith, all beard and certainty"—Olson: "and by god if there wasn't John Smith / all got up in ruff and armor"). I mention this because it shows Olson's close familiarity with precedent poems and reminds us of another aspect of the occasion of his own—his review of Bradford Smith's *Captain John Smith: His Life & Legend*. Though Smith's book was published in 1953, internal evidence suggests that Olson did not have it during the period of the poem's composition and that his review, along with the reply to Grover Smith mentioned in it, was a defense against what he was sure would be the inhospitable reception of his work. The review is a valuable gloss because in it Olson upholds his choice of Smith as a central figure ("The name is Smith, John Smith. And that's what I'm bucking"), mentions other figures in the poems (Pytheus, Columbus, La Cosa, Stendhal, and Elbert Hubbard), and vehemently rehearses the theme of advertising ("Why I sing Smith is this, that the *geographic*, the sudden *land* of the place is in there, not described, not local, not represented—like all

advertisements, all the shit now pours out, the American Road, the filthiness, of graphic words, Mo-dess . . ."). But still more valuable is his defense of Smith's prose style—his own also convincing us that "style is, the man"—and, as in the reply to Grover Smith, his championing of the then deprecated work of Williams, Pound, Crane, and "some others." *The Maximus Poems*, we remember, were not written in an auspicious time and were necessarily adversary.

Olson had to buck the Smith of his childhood recollection and to put in its place, or alongside it, the Smith he goes on to present chiefly in Smith's own words. This is the Smith who "sounded / [New England's] bays, ran her coast, and wrote down / Algonquin so scrupulously Massachusetts . . ."—the Smith whose virtue of discovering is one with writing, who, Olson says in the review, put New England down "in prose I can feel now the way his boat bent along the same coasts I know. . . ." ("Mind you," he adds, "he was doing it for one of the very first times, it's a different thing, to feel a coast, an ancient thing this Smith had, what men had to have before Pytheas, to move. . . .") Yet this Smith is also an underdog. He "got shoved aside" and was not fully credited with the founding he made possible nor appreciated by the "theocracy" for recognizing the wealth of fish, "the eye he had / for what New England offered. . . ."

Smith is a mediator, a model for the self, with whom Olson, himself a discoverer and map-maker, identifies in both his successes and failures. In the deservedly praised confession that follows ("Letter 12"), Smith is a measure of the poet's "agilities," a man, unlike the poet, at home at sea and in the world (not, in the Heraclitan phrase that names one of the deepest motives of Olson's work, "estranged / from that which was most familiar"). His growth, we know, was not delayed like the poet's, nor was he, himself a poet and writer, divorced from the "world's / businesses." Olson's self-deprecatory confession turns back to the exercises for the morning of "Tyrian Businesses" and the self-vindication of "Letter 9," and looks ahead to the consideration of poetry and economics in "Letter 15." As with so many writers in the tradition of the American scholar, his passive, contemplative, second-hand (rather than primary, active) life troubles him. He has not been equal to his notion of stance; his capabilities are negative, no "actual willful man" but one who has "had to be given, / a life, love, and from one man / the world."<sup>5</sup> And yet, to turn to the Keatsian phrase so important to him, he has negative capability. As he says in taking more positive stock of himself, he is "a wind / and water man," who, unlike Ferrini, knows where weather comes from. He knows how to sit (to dance sitting down) and to "look out" (which reminds one of Louis Douglas' comment on Olson's apartment in Gloucester: "My Lord, Charlie, you do have, you have some, you have a lot of windows looking out!"). And he knows that the "undone business" is not so much the "world's / businesses" as psychological readi-

ness for the movement and self-action treated in earlier poems. The sea stretches out *from* his feet: everywhere, for everyone, there is a world to discover and, as Smith said, he can only learn to tell it "by the continual hazard of my life."

Olson's revulsion with peyorocracy is to some extent a gauge of difficulties encountered in the world and in the self. The inadequacy expressed in "Letter 12" probably accounts for his disdain in "Letter 13" of the "merchandise men" past and present who betrayed Columbus' Mediterranean vision of the New World. In no other poem does he consider the promoters of North Atlantic fishing and exploration "conquistadors," identifying them with the Spanish conquest of Mexico—with the spoliation of possibilities which he too had appreciated during his stay in Yucatan. Always he celebrates those who turned to northern waters for fish, as in the account of all that led to the discovery of America in "On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa's Eyes" ("Letter 17"): "St. Malo, however. / Or Biscay. Or Bristol. / Fishermen, had, for how long, / talked. . . ." But here his feeling is for the South, for the warm, erotic, and pagan; for a world where he could, he found, at last wear his flesh without choking. The North, now as then, is barren, as he also tells us by means of the wider (empty) spacing:

#### Venus

does not arise from

these waters. Fish

do.

This collocation of personal and public history marks the subsequent letters. "Letter 14" treats the Hawkinses ("the family / span America from the finding / to the settling of those fishermen"), only after early sections, reminiscent of "Tyrian Businesses" in their definitional procedure and theme, present vaguely charged erotic dream material and recollection. "Letter 15" addresses Olson's concern for accurate reporting and his mode of composition before introducing John Smith's "The Sea Marke," the only poem incorporated in *Maximus*, as a landmark of English verse indicating both the succession from Shakespeare and the present separation of "economics & poetics," the distance from Smith's *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New England* to the contemporary poet's sardonic recognition of the poetry of advertising ("The true troubadours / are CBS"). And "Letter 16" continues with remarks to Creeley on the miserable economic situation of poets as evidence of the peyorocracy that resulted from betrayals like those of Bowditch and Higginson.

So much for the first half of volume II, which traces a history of decline and tallies it with the poet's difficulties and dismay. The historical sequence within the poems is not chronological but imaginative, and in the subsequent poems Olson recovers—rediscovers, finds again and founds—the New World and his confidence. "On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa's Eyes," the brilliantly entitled and executed "Letter 17," recaptures the poet's enthusiasm for John Smith (Smith and La Cosa are associated: "Smith . . . got it into words, didn't, as Juan de la Cosa did it so handsomely, by a map") and for his own comparable work. It provides a perspective of wonder equal to that of Crane's "Ave Maria" and Williams' treatment of Columbus in *In the American Grain*, and it renews his (our) vision of America, and with remarkable skill tells in its presentational way the long history of North Atlantic discovery and the immemorial cost of life at sea.

It belongs with another wonderful poem, "The Twist" ("Letter 18"), because this poem, mostly composed of dream materials, tells of the poet's twisted (inseparable) discoveries of Gloucester, sexuality, and poetry. The poem enacts its tropic theme, uniting its elements in one lustre, as Olson had defined "constellate" in "Letter 14" and there suggested the analogy of dream-work. It locates the tropic core of childhood and dreams, and twists with the flowing/flowering (from neap to full tide) of his experience, an essentially outward and thrusting possession of the New England landscape that comprises his world. It honors his boyhood in Worcester, recalls the excursions by trolley, those "voyages" with his father to the "outer-land," a landscape of childhood so cherished that he places at the end of the line, in its paradisaical, pastoral, erotic landscape, his wife and new baby. It tells, in a lovely line, of the journey to Gloucester—"I go up-dilly, elevated, tenement / down"—and recovers the rainy day when, five or six years old, he first saw the sea, and the St. Valentine's Day storm fifteen years later that prompted his first poem, and, he now recognizes, makes the sea as much his source as it was Pytheus':

The harbor the same,  
the night of the St. Valentine  
storm: the air  
sea ground the same, tossed  
ice wind snow (Pytheus) one

The poem merges the boy of five, the young man of twenty, and the present self, and it is true to dream-work because, though the material of the dreams concerns discovery, the country in them is familiar: "I recognize / the country not discovera. . . ." And what he recognizes in this landscape, in particular in the rushing waters of the Annisquam, is the full force of his creative powers, powers at once sexual and poetic, making us wonder

if his need in poetry, like Williams', is a need to discover (enter) and marry the world. The twisting of the concluding lines expresses in flowering an immense energy and overflow of being:

the tide roars over  
  
    some curves off,  
when it's the river's turn, shoots  
calyx and corolla by the dog  
                                    (August,  
the flowers break off  
  
                    but the anther,  
the filament of now, the mass  
drives on,  
  
                    the whole of it  
coming,  
to this pin-point  
to turn  
  
                    in this day's sun,  
in this veracity  
  
there, the waters the several of them the roads  
  
here, a blackberry blossom

"Veracity" ties back to "la verité" in the preceding poem, and the passage itself recalls in that poem the annual floral tribute Gloucester pays to those who perished at sea. In the fullness of life, Olson acknowledges in blossom and river-road the course of his life from childhood, the risks of living, and the apprehension of death that, we see in early poems like "The Story of an Olson, and Bad Thing," moved him to resistance and poetry.

In the concluding poem he says that poetry stops the battle, yet even so it is itself an active, resistant enterprise, the work with which he attacks chaos, the act by which he both lifts the real to clarity and finds out who he is. Honor, the thematic thread of the last four poems (Letters 19, 20, 21, 22), is a concept Olson revives because it accords with his notion of stance, of a universe in which we are no longer clothed in the garments of hierarchical thought<sup>6</sup> but, standing naked in the face of reality, must, by our own acts, the decisions we make each instant, clothe ourselves in honor. Honor is not extrinsic but intrinsic, the accompaniment of heroic (veracious) action, the



tropic action of the self. The “nasturtium” he says, “is my shield”; we know this from “Tyrian Businesses,” where the nasturtium, “my nose-twist, my beloved, my / trophy,” has shield-shaped leaves and belongs to the genus *Tropaeolum*—is the exemplar of the tropic self. This self is pristine like his baby daughter’s—always new, always awake, face to face with the world and resistant to it. It answers “loudly, / back” with its own song, in the poems which for him are a “cantus firmus.” And what they answer—and demonstrate—is that “chaos / is not our condition,” that poetry is not achieved by “relaxation” but by strenuous attention, and not by the “omnivore” but by the “amovore” who selects, who knows, as Olson said at the outset, that “love is form.” If poetry stops the battle, it is not so much by symbolically purifying war, as Kenneth Burke believes, as by calling attention to heroic human acts (centers) in the midst of battle, Olson’s metaphor for the melee of human existence. Poetry celebrates human action, and those acts which, we are reminded by “men, / and girls,” are necessary to the fuller human possibilities of polis. Poetry itself is heroic. It requires risk, the “pushing against limits” (“Letter 6”) that in the dream of driving the car in the concluding poem the poet happily finds he has accomplished. It is worthy action that restores the poet’s confidence.

### III *The Maximus Poems 23-37*

Writing from Black Mountain, in August, 1953, Olson told Cid Corman that he had given readings of the previous installments on two successive Sunday evenings and was now uncertain about what was to follow. In September he reported that “11-23 got solid in August”—it seems that he thought of “Letter 23” as part of the second installment—and he told Corman that he had got *Maximus* “off its proper track (with #24, and through #33)” but that now, once again, had “seen the path forward.” Yet by June, 1954, *Maximus* had become “the MONSTER.” It became so, he said, “over the past year”; it had got lost “somewhere in the ’40s” and he had had to “re-attack,” to find his way back to his path as well as that of the poem.

That Olson had difficulty with the third installment of *Maximus* is all that we can establish with certainty from these important letters—important because they offer clues to Olson’s way of composing and to the ultimate form of the poems. What, for example, does he mean by “got solid”? Was the omission of “Letter 23” an editorial decision, to keep the second volume the size of the first? Are the present poems, “Letter 24” through “Letter 33,” those that were written in 1953 or those (have the initial poems become “solid”?) written in Gloucester in 1957-58? And what—most interesting of all—does he mean by having got lost in the ’40’s? Does he mean that what he had already written had been too exclusively concerned with his

vocational decision—the repudiation of politics he had made in the '40's—or even, perhaps, that what he had written was still too political? What was the “proper track,” the direction he seems to have had in mind for his poem? Did it turn away, as the third installment suggests, from the dream material so conspicuous in the previous installment?

Whoever decided—probably Jonathan Williams—to publish only “Letters 11-22” in the second installment was right, for “Letter 23” is a new beginning.<sup>7</sup> The format is new, and in respect to method and basic theme this letter is prefatory. It begins after the fashion of *Call Me Ishmael* with facts (“The facts are”) and enacts Olson’s “finding out for oneself,” the *istorin* that he associates with Herodotus and explains in *The Special View of History*, the most useful gloss on this poem. He says in the poem that he “would be an historian as Herodotus was, looking/ for oneself for the evidence of/ what is said. . . .” This declaration of purpose summarizes the argument in *The Special View of History* presented in the poem: the poet is a *muthologos*, not a liar, as Plato believed, but one who relates “what is said” (i.e., “Altham says/ Winslow/ was at Cape Ann in April,/ 1624”); his concern is not “truth”—the general and abstract—but the particular evidence; and he works in behalf of the “restoration of the principle of fact. . . .” Olson fulfills this purpose in the subsequent poems, notably those on the rush and decline of fishing at Gloucester during the years 1623-1627, where his practice supports the contention that “if you have ever cut behind any American event or any presentation, you will know the diminishment I am . . . asserting. . . .” “Letters 23-32” give this installment its marked historical character not only because they represent the historical center of *Maximus*, the fullest, extended treatment of the founding of Gloucester, but because the poet’s activity in these poems (as in another sequence, “West”) is conspicuously that of a historian finding out for himself, discovering and pondering the evidence. This—the combined historical and historiographical concern—accounts for much of the excitement of these poems, poems that in some measure recall *Mayan Letters*, the example par excellence of the incredible energy and enthusiasm of Olson’s scholarship.

These poems are considerably factual. Sometimes Olson directly presents the documentary evidence, as in “The Record” (Letter 29), and for the most part the cadence, even of the tristichs, tetrastichs, and cinquains (“fivers,” Olson calls them) which now figure prominently, is appropriately prose-like. The voice is often meditative, sometimes interior, the poet speaking to himself (“Letter 23”: “The facts are”; “But here is the first surprise”; “What we have here—and literally in my own front yard, as I sd to Merk”; “What we have in this field is the scraps among these fishermen . . .”); sometimes public, as in “Maximus, to Gloucester” (Letter 25); “I don’t mean, just like that, to put down/ the Widow Babson. . . .”

But to say that they are factual and meditative is not to say that they

are subdued or without energy. There is the excitement of discovery, as in "The Record" ("Here we have it"), for what we have *is* the record, immediate contact with the evidence, which is charged for us not only by the fact that it is the present testimony of the past, the past restored to our present, but by the place of this poem in the sequence.<sup>8</sup> Of greater consequence, perhaps, is the accompanying effort of the poet-historian to imaginatively verify the evidence and to see in it its representative historical value.

Olson's characteristic practice follows that of Carl Sauer, who tests the historical record against his own personal experience of the human landscape, and that of Thoreau, who recovers history by means of his own experience, his own original relation to nature. In "Letter 24" ("a Plantation a beginning": the letters are now frequently given titles) he lives into his understanding—*realization* might be better—of the hardship and cost of planting by way of his own present awareness of the weather:

I sit here on a Sunday  
with grey water, the winter  
staring me in the face

This calls up and verifies the words from John White's *The Planters' Plea* that immediately follow, where the archaic spelling doesn't distance historical reality so much as vividly recover it:

"the Snow lyes indeed  
about a foot thicke  
for ten weekes" John White

warns any prospective  
planter

He also realizes—and evokes—the rocky shore from his own experience: "where I as young man berthed/ a skiff and scarfed/ my legs to get up rocks. . . ." And difference as well as similarity of experience enables him to reconstitute the past and, as in the contrast of present "leisure" and past "worke" in the recollection of Stage Fort Park, to judge the present.

Stage Head is the geographical center of *The Maximus Poems* and the historical center of the letters that treat the planting. It is also the personal center: as Olson says, in "Letter 25," "all the hill and hollow/ I know best in all the world"—his *place*, as he indicates in a letter to Joyce Benson ("I was raised in a house which is the ear on the g of Stage (Fort) on the back cover [of *The Maximus Poems*]"). "Letter 25," part of the sequence on the planting, provides this perspective. Now the "beginnings" are more

deeply linked with the poet's own beginnings, and he is explicitly concerned with imagining the beginning and acquiring for himself what the men who first planted had—the “nakedness” that enables them to see it new. Now his memory—and much of our memory of all that has preceded this poem—gathers at this geographical center:

But just there lies the thing, that “fisherman's Field”  
(Stage Head, Stage Fort, and now and all my childhood  
a down-dilly park for cops and robbers, baseball, firemen's  
hose, North End Italian Sunday spreads, night-time Gloucester  
monkey-business) stays the first place Englishmen  
first felt the light and winds, the turning, from that view,  
of what is now the City—gulls the same but otherwise the sounds  
were different for those fourteen men, probably the ocean  
ate deeper at the shore, crashed further up at Cressy's (why  
they took their shelter either side of softer Stage Head and let  
Tablet Rock buff for them the weather side: on the lee,  
below the ridge which runs from my house straight to Tablet Rock  
these Dorset Somerset men built the Company house which Endicott  
thought grand enough to pull it down and haul it all the way  
to Salem for his Governor's abode. . . .

And he is aware that his present position in a rented house on Fort Point, like that of the house of his childhood, is a vantage of historical utility, permitting him “to view/ those men/ who saw her [Gloucester]/ first” as nakedly, as freshly, as they viewed Cape Ann in 1623.

That he can do this, and that “Gloucester can view/ those men,” is a reversal, a turning outward to beginnings, an imaginative newing by becoming aware of what newness was, cost, meant. This turning is an essential act of the poem, and the passage is important because it defines nakedness, the essential condition of Olson's preferred—desired—way of being in the world:

He left him naked,  
the man said, and  
nakedness  
is what one means

that all start up  
to the eye and soul  
as though it had never  
happened before

Creeley's comment on these verses in *A Quick Graph* provides an excellent gloss: "Nakedness' is to stand manifestly in one's own condition, in that necessary *freshness*, however exposed, because all things are particular and reality itself is the specific content of an instant's possibility." This gloss incorporates the gist of Olson's remark to Elaine Feinstein that he means by "primitive" the "'primary,' as how one finds anything, pick it up as one does new—fresh/ first" and his repeated statement from Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* that "nothing is so marvellous as to be alone in the phenomenal world, which is raging, and yet apart." And Creeley also indicates the importance of nakedness to Olson (and to himself) by using these verses as the epigraph to Olson's *Selected Writings*. Olson conveys his appreciation of nakedness in the concluding lyrical verses:

A year that year  
was new to men  
the place had bred  
in the mind of another

John White had seen it  
in his eye  
but fourteen men  
of whom we know eleven

twenty-two eyes  
and the snow flew  
where gulls now paper  
the skies

where fishing continues  
and my heart lies

And for all the differences between time past and time present the poem brings him, as Creeley noted, though not addressing *Maximus*, to the realization of the "fact of *firstness*," to the "condition of life most viable and primal in our own lives."

To recover the beginning—that is why Olson goes back in time and tries to see it freshly. The beginning, the origin, is in the experience of nakedness, in the repossession of one's primary world. He defines his own deepest motive when he defines Melville's in *Call Me Ishmael*: "Beginner—and interested in beginnings. Melville had a way of reaching back in time until he got history pushed back so far he turned time into space. He was like a migrant backtrailing to Asia, some Inca trying to find a lost home. . . . He

had a pull to the origin of things, etc. . . ." Imperatives both psychic and poetic meet here, the need to return, to come home (as expressed, for example, in "Apollonius of Tyana") and the need to name anew, from new ground. But we should not forget that Olson-the-historian is also concerned with genesis. Like Sauer, again, he knew the value of small beginnings ("culture hearths") and men unheralded in history. He appreciated and practiced what Sauer, whom he met in 1947, called "genetic human geography"; and Sauer's account of his discipline—his field work—serves well for understanding Olson's activity in the field of his poem. "It is real discovery," Sauer says, ". . . to take old documents into the field and relocate forgotten places, to see where the wilderness [or the city, for that matter] has repossessed scenes of active life, to note what internal migrations of inhabitants and of their productive bases have occurred. There comes a time in such study when the picture begins to fit together, and one comes to that high moment when the past is clear, and the contrasts with the present are understood." Olson also treats the founding of Gloucester as attentively as he does because it is a representative event of the larger historical conflict of the time ("Letter 22" concludes with remarks on the significance of the fight for Stage Head in respect to "mercantilism" and "nascent capitalism"); because it is an event in a still longer history of human migration ("the motion / (the Westward motion) / comes here, / to land"); and because it is a frontier situation that anticipates the subsequent stages of the movement westward (he had been a student of Merk's). Our greater familiarity with the later stages—the fur-trapping, the Mormon trek, the gold rush—helps us evoke conditions appropriate to the fourteen men who first planted on the rocky shore. Their adventure, Olson tells us, was "the adventure// of the new frontier / (not boom, or gold, / the lucky strike, // but work, a fishing. . . ." And "1622 to 1626 was the fish rush," Gloucester was a "cowtown," and Stage Fight, which he recreates in these terms, was "a Western." The jumble of events in the large block paragraph opening "So Sassafras" (Letter 26) is the most evocative presentation of these themes, a verbal event that recaptures (parallels, "transposes," Olson would say) the energies and multiple purposes of the historical event.

Within the sequence of poems on planting, "Letters 30, 31, and 32," which conclude it, form a smaller sequence. In "Some Good News" (Letter 30) Olson again brings forward John Smith, now as the one who in the long chronicle of discovery "changed / everything"—named Cape Ann "so it's stuck, / and Englishmen . . . / sat down, planted / fisheries / so they've stayed put. . . ." Smith, with Columbus, General Grant, Melville, and Olson too, is treated here, in meditative passages on a theme from Melville's *Moby-Dick*: "the hustings of the Divine Inert," as Olson states it in "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself." The proper hero is not Ahab, whom Olson had repudiated in *Call Me Ishmael* ("Ahab," he said, "is full stop"), but "a dif-

ferent sort of a possible man," one, neglected and passive, who nevertheless is ready for the occasion in history that calls him into action. So much is clear in this obscure poem, whose very difficulty in this instance indicates its importance. For one feels the pressure of private meanings not fully disclosed. When Olson speaks of "a man's / struggle/ / with Caesar's / dream / that he'd been intimate / with his mother," he seems to be referring to his own Oedipal difficulties as well as to his concern with their relation to the man of power *and* the man of achievement; and when he speaks of the emergence of the proper hero from "the collapse / of the previous/ / soul," he seems to have in mind the turning in his career, prompted by the atom bomb, from politician to poet. The bomb, in fact, is probably the historical occasion Olson meets by means of *The Maximus Poems*. *Call Me Ishmael* announced a work of another kind than *Moby-Dick*—or to another end than Ahab's—and this letter with its angry awareness of current history and apprehension over the future, is, if not "some good news," the summons to a newing that may provide it. This is the intent of *The Maximus Poems*, and Olson's exploration of these materials—and his interest in the polis, the community he would plant—is for him comparable to the work of John Smith in *A Description of New England* (1616). "It wasn't new," he writes, "what happened, / at Cape Ann. It's where, / and when it/ / did. Smith, at Monhegan, 1614, and telling / about it, in a book, 1616. . . ."

Where "Letter 30" tells of the importance of the "small" news of the planting, "Letters 31 and 32" tell of the subsequent Commonwealth and the betrayal of the newing. "Stiffening, in the Master Founders' Wills" (Letter 31) treats the "faulting" or fracture of the Puritan establishment and the stiffening in doctrine occasioned by this—the turning backward and inward that denied the change Winthrop, in his own experience of the wilderness, knew had come, a change, however, not to be forestalled forever, evident now in the long-legged girls and boys who "don't want to live/ / in dead ceremonies / of white bulls, or surplices / of Whiteness of the soul's / desire to be blind. . . ." No, to see, as the sailors saw, is the requisite thing—

And one desire  
that the soul  
be naked  
at the end

of time

. . .

That, and the restoration of the polis. For what is important to Olson in

“Capt Christopher Levett (of York)” (Letter 32) is not that the settlement at Cape Ann “led on / to Commonwealth” but that Levett, like Roger Conant, built a house. The building of the house is for Olson the “measure” of the cashing-in on the New World and the spoliation of the new that outrage him. Levett, he tells us, speaks of his house “as he does of each / new thing he saw and did / in these new parts,” but we, living at this “poor end,” find nothing tolerable—not to say wonderful—for our “eyes” to “strike.” So having himself recovered the newness in writing these poems, Olson now despairs of “the dirtiness of goodness/ / cheapness shit [that] is / upon the world.” And his house (polis) becomes a defense against a despoiled America, not “‘those savage people’”:

We'll turn  
to keep our house, turn to  
houses where our kind,  
and hungry after them,  
  
not willing to bear one short walk  
more out into even what they've done  
to earth itself, find  
company.

The poem, and the sequence it concludes, ends in the poet's wrath and denunciation:

the newness  
  
the first men know was almost  
from the start dirtied  
by second comers. About seven years  
and you can carry cinders  
in your hand for what  
  
America was worth. May she be damned  
for what she did so soon  
to what was such a newing  
...

Juxtaposition makes the break between the two sections into which the third installment divides, and purges the previous despair by turning to the hazards—and by implication, heroism—of fishing. “1st Letter on Georges” (Letter 33) is actually composed of two letters, the first a document in prose framed by couplets telling of a storm and disaster to the fishing fleet in 1862 (the episode is well-told and speaks well for the culture of fisher-



men and of the 19th century), the second an assembly of evidence gathered by Olson from old fishermen he knew concerning the loss of the *Ella M. Goodwin* during a storm in 1905. Thematically, this letter goes back to "Letter 2," where fishermen, one an informant in the later poem, are first celebrated; it carries all the resonances of fishing in *The Maximus Poems* and, since fishing is both the past and present work of Gloucester, may even be considered continuous with the letters on the fish rush. It is also continuous in another sense: as an example of Olson's historiographic concern, as another presentation of facts, of what was said. Yet there is a break, answering to the rhythm of the poet's despair and hope, a turning which prefigures that enacted in "Maximus, to Gloucester, Sunday, July 19" (Letter 36), the letter treating the annual flower ceremony for fishermen lost at sea. This letter, with the initial letter (Letter 33), provides the essential unity of this section.

The intervening letters tell of current city politics and politicians ("the greased ways / of the city now") and of the poet's excursion as a cultural geographer, his effort to recover the past and the motivation of settlers by staking out old sites on Meetinghouse Green in terms of present landmarks. (Here, as if to verify "metric . . . is mapping," a statement in a footnote to "Letter 34," words and numerals at the beginning and end of the poem are disposed spatially, in the form of a map.)

By this time, the past, to repeat Sauer's words, "is clear [enough], and the contrasts with the present are understood." Despair is still the groundtone of both letters and very much the mounting feeling of "Letter 35." The meditation of this letter again concerns the newness and its spoliation, and several elements thread it: Stefansson's notion of the progressive northwest movement of civilization into the arctic regions he explored and believed economically favorable, and which Olson considers a "dead end . . . in the ice"; the theory, perhaps gleaned from Sauer, of the advance of peoples from the sea; the awareness of the geological history of Cape Ann; and the uroboric notion of beginnings-and-ends, of forces and events returning on themselves, exemplified in the circular movement of the poem, which ends not only with the sea that antedates discovery but with the poet's return to the landscape of his childhood and to Kent Circle,<sup>9</sup> where he wrote his first poems and essays. The stable, cherished landmarks are natural: marsh, river, rocks, dunes, sea. But the poet is burdened by the ecological negligence ("dogs of the present don't even throw anything back") and by his knowledge of the historical outcome—the cashing-in—of the planting. A profound desire, related to his boyhood in Gloucester, prompts his wish to live in the Gloucester that he, like Frances Rose-Troup, has worked so hard to repossess. Both historically and psychologically, *The Maximus Poems* concerns repossession, and among its most moving lines are these of child-like remonstrance, "Go 'way and leave / Rose-Troup and myself."

Not only has the natural landscape been despoiled by noise and smell and “rubbish / of white man” but the sea has been forgotten. The dogs of the present no longer remember what the Rev. Daniel M. Wilson said on August 21, 1892, in a sermon on the 250th anniversary of the founding—that

we must reckon  
with the great sea the influences  
of it the salt breath of it  
have interfused the sadness of it have interfused  
Zebulon [Gloucester by way of “he shall be a haven of ships”]

They have forgotten what *The Maximus Poems* have recalled for us and what the poet, by citing still another minister, now employs in his own jeremiad. On the same anniversary occasion the Rev. John Trask preached on a text from Edward Johnson’s *Wonder-Working Providence* (1654) on the delay in planting a church at “Gloster”—on the fact that Gloucester was people by fishermen, and that, being difficult to approach by land, was not heavily populated. Now, with Route 128 and the A. Piatt Andrew Bridge connecting Gloucester to the “nation,” this is no longer the case, and the poet, reminded of “fission” by the roar of overhead traffic, is “interfused” not with the sea but with the “rubbish/ / of creation. . . .”

Though the bulldozer uncovers the permanent primordial Gloucester and the sun, in its recurrence, suggests a permanent newness (“makes / a west here”), the poet is not heartened. Johnson’s words remind him of an historical analogue, the Greek invasion of Egypt, and of the fact that the Englishmen who came here (he cites the names of early settlers, their birth-places, and their real estate transactions) were also “Peoples of the Sea,” invaders. The sea, he realizes, also admitted the exploiters, and “From/ / then to now nothing / new. . . .” Now the breath of the sea is bad and the river is “unmellowed,” and his feeling is apocalyptic. Stefansson’s theory, which he again entertains, is one of decline if not doom, the end of all the dreams, of the migration of peoples, that began when Pytheas discovered the fishing grounds of the Atlantic (“Stefansson’s ice, what trade replaced Pytheas’s sludge with”). Gloucester is, as in the old railroad joke he tells, the end of the line, and his poem, to borrow Kenneth Burke’s idea of terministic development, has also reached the end of one of its lines. So he would have the sea and ice repossess the Cape, that we might “start all over”:

	step off	
onto the nation		The sea
will rush over		The ice
will drag boulders		Commerce

was changed the fathometer  
 was invented here the present  
 is worse give nothing now your credence  
 start all over step off the  
 Orontes onto land no Typhon  
 no understanding of a cave  
 . . . .

Starting all over is comparable to stepping off the Orontes onto land; it brings us back to the violence of geological and mythic origins, to the continental rift of Mesozoic times and to the battle of Zeus and Typhon (an analogue of the battle of fathers and sons) that will inform *Maximus IV*, V, VI. But now we lack mythic understanding and, as before, at the time of the planting, are hindered in building (rebuilding) by “‘times of combustion.’” This is the context in which he reminds Gloucester of Rose-Troup, whose scholarly work “solely gave you place in the genetic world” and whose work is of such fidelity that he “connects [it] back to Champlain.” By way of both he works back to the historical concerns with which he began and to the harbor charted at the end of the poem. This is the final turning of his thought: to the genesis of Gloucester, to the beginning, to the sea from which the newcomers quickly turned and to which he returns because, in consequence of their (and “Our”) turning, “it’s earth which / now is strange. . . .”

Turnings of thought and feeling answer to other turnings, and by returning to the sea, whose motions for him as for Whitman are cosmic and mysterious and of ultimate rhythmic importance, he brings the poems, in “Maximus, to Gloucester, Sunday, July 19” (Letter 36), to an all-gathering depth. “Letter 36” is one of the great achievements of *The Maximus Poems*, a poem on (of) death and resurrection, on (of) the process world to which Olson gives his faith as well as his faith, also resurrectional, in polis. The poem is essentially meditative and turns on the flower ceremony first briefly remarked in “On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa’s Eyes.” This ceremony involves what most concerns Gloucester—sea, fishing, risk and death—but is not now, as he would have it, the ritual center of the community.

The poem begins in a Poundian fashion, in fact appropriately recalls the opening line of the *Cantos* (“And then went down to ship”). It opens in the midst of an on-going action, for there are no “beginnings” and “ends,” only the process indicated by the process of the poem, the openness of its beginning and end. Also following Pound, it incorporates textual fragments, in this instance from Heraclitus, and addresses the cultural consequences of bad art. Bad art—the Fishermen’s Memorial: Leonard Craske’s “Man at the Wheel”—is connected, for Olson, with carelessness (lack of care, of

“eyes”), with empty reverence and lies. To him the immense figure of the Gloucester fisherman that Joseph Garland finds heroic is a “bronze idol” and misrepresents “what a fisherman is. . . .”<sup>10</sup> For a fisherman, he says “is not a successful man / he is not a famous man he is not a man / of power. . . .” He is, instead, a man of achievement, characterized by the Keatsian virtue of negative capability, of existing in “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”—a capability necessary to the resurrection the poem enacts. The fisherman, he says, “works without reference to / that difference [of day and night, life and death]”; he lives fearlessly in the process, accepts its laws and the mystery of sea-change (evoked by echoes of *The Tempest*). This mystery, witnessed in the flower ceremony, is what the poem enacts.

Dropped into the Cut, “the flowers tear off / the wreathes. . . .” The verbal *wreathes* is double: perhaps the flowers are freed by the destructive waters from the commemoration of death, and also, perhaps never having been shaped in wreaths, they now wreath the recognition of it. The “flowers / turn”—and “turn / the character of the sea,” whose outward tides now turn inward. This reversal is resurrectional:

The drowned men are undrowned  
in the eddies  
of the eyes  
of the flowers  
opening  
the sea’s eyes

The disaster  
is undone

*Undrowned, undone*: these verbs of action negating action, like Hart Crane’s “unrocking” in “Paraphrase,” do much of the work, are verbal equivalents, themselves miracles of transformation. The inset lines eddy in the motion of their backward-forward meaning, for the eyes may also be the eyes of the flowers, and the opening flowers may also open the sea’s eyes, as we learn later is the case: “there are eyes / in this water/ / the flowers from the shore, / awakened / the sea. . . .” Care and attention and the ritual of flowers are efficacious; they open the sea, not only its eyes of sleep but the door of its tomb. “Opening,” set off by itself, is the great miraculous action, again like Crane’s “nights opening” in the resurrectional “Lachrymae Christi”—and the tomb’s opening reminds us of “At Melville’s Tomb,” a poem of Crane’s also in evidence and here repudiated.<sup>11</sup>

The ritual as he sees and interprets it enacts resurrection, and that, to cite “The Twist,” a previous poem of turning, is the veracity in this day’s

sun. The flowers, "received as alien," return on the tide, and death, also alien, "this gross fact," returns. "In this upset" both contribute to his feeling that "the sensation [of transformation] is true," that transformation, as Heraclitus said (actually *says* in the present of the text), is the cosmic miracle: "all things are exchanged for fire, and fire for all things."

The flower ceremony reminds us of Olson's long preoccupation with death. In the second part of the poem, he recalls the geysers at Yellowstone that he had seen on his trip West in 1938, the trip on which he strained his heart. They evoke for him "death the diseased / presence on us, the spilling lesion/ / of the brilliance / it is to be alive," the living condition, his own, as he had acknowledged in "The Story of an Olson, and Bad Thing." And the ceremony also brings to mind his father's death, obliquely referred to in the comment on burial at sea:

When a man's coffin is the sea  
the whole of creation shall come to his funeral,

it turns out; the globe  
is below, all lapis

and its blue surface golded  
by what happened

this afternoon: there are eyes  
in this water

The flowers awaken the sea to *see*. And in this context, they awaken the father, again recalled by the recollection of *The Tempest* ("Full fathom five thy father lies . . ."). And for good reason when we remember the epigraph of *Call Me Ishmael*:

O fahter, fahter  
gone amoong

O eeys that loke

Loke, fahter:  
your sone!

The sea-change Olson desires involves his father's recognition, from the outset a profound motive of his work. It involves an answering, in Whitman's sense, of the universe, an "awakening" that restores trust by overcoming the sense of negation. This is the miracle the poem (his flower)

would work and may have worked for him. Death cannot be “rectified” but it may be accepted—met in this way with care. In this, his greatest poem on death, Olson teaches Gloucester to establish polis in care for primary mystery.

In the last poem, “April Today Main Street,” Olson disregards the chronology of the sequence in order to end with spring. This does not necessarily certify hope of renewal. For although April reminds him of April, 1642, when Gloucester, refounded by the Massachusetts Bay Company, was made “to stick,” the contrast of past and present shapes the meditative course of the poem and contributes to the interrogative with which it ends. Neither this question (“the 128 bridge / now brings in/ / what, / to Main Street?”) nor the poem concludes the poet’s work, his continuing, daily activity of moving within his environment and looking for evidence. For him walking is an excursion into past-and-present, a past made present, and a past and present so interfused that almost everything he sees or hears is significant. What preoccupies him on this April day, with its “mean easterly” wind, is the outcome of John Smith’s vision of the fishing “mines,” the true wealth of New England. Smith imagined

the Indies

lying just  
offshore to be drawn up

on silk lines & glowing hooks  
fishermen in palanquins, robed women

watching, holding children  
on the shore, a daisy world, the silver ore

codfish.

The patent “to promote / the fishing” secured the wealth but not the daisy world of Smith’s vision, a world, even with its possible association with the poet’s tansy world, judged by him for its innocence and impossibility. The evidence, as in the instance of Osmund Dutch, shows the process of getting wealth that encouraged immigration, the success of the new town, and the inward, continental movement of migration. This process, aided by grants and subsidies, is a representative fact. It recalls subsequent economic history, and its measure is the present (Vinson’s Cove now a parking lot), when, with the westward movement completed, the direction of movement has reversed, and, as the concluding question suggests, what had hopefully

been a positive force returns as a negative one. The poet's question reminds us of an earlier judgment—that the “newness / . . . was / . . . dirtied / by second comers,” that we can now “carry cinders / in [our hands] for what/ / America was worth.” This judgment is not unusual. It is an appraisal common in our time. Yet it still moves us because the poet, by working his way into the materials of *The Maximus Poems*, has realized it anew.

“April Today Main Street” brings the poet back to present-day Gloucester, the Gloucester he had addressed in “Letter 1.” Now he is integral with his world. The activities of historian and poet—more successfully joined than Olson had expected them to be in *Mayan Letters*—have enabled him to walk at greater ease in his place, have, in fact, given him a place. Though he harshly judges the present, he is not as estranged from it as he was at the start, for in an archaeological fashion he has recovered the past and brought it into the present. To this extent he may be said to have re-founded his city. He has not compelled Gloucester to change, but he has kept his eye on the polis, and in his own activity demonstrated a stance more favorable for the future than that of Ahab. His skillfully woven poem proves his love of Gloucester (“love is not easy”), the love requisite to form (“love is form”), and the effort (“that which you can do”) which underwrites polis. And for the reader, to whom the poet transfers his energy, the poem is polis, its space a meeting-place, its form the image, as Olson says in “Apollonius of Tyana,” “around which any people concentrate and commit themselves. . . .”

One may say that Olson's polis is pastoral, or, with David Ignatow, that “Olson [is] the poet of old New England's fisheries and small villages and towns. . . .” But this, though true enough, does not fully measure the poem any more than Ignatow's belief that Olson has “the ebullience of a man safely ensconced in his conditions”—that he can “lean back and relax, be prosy, long-winded, documentary, in complete security about himself and his metier, his environment, which is feeding him all that he needs.” The poem, I think, tells another, more demanding story, of familiarity difficultly won, of security never attained. In *The Maximus Poems* Olson does not aspire to completion but to renewed activity; the end is actually another beginning. And activity must be renewed because Olson's concern with Gloucester is both deeper and more personal than his concern for polis. Olson speaks it when he says of Apollonius: “He . . . had the stubborn sense . . . that he and Tyana were bound together and that the binding was an image of health in the world. He had earlier found that his body and his mind could not be conceived as separable from each other. Now he took it that man and his world too were a sheaf at the harvest, just as seed and the earth were blackly joined in the growing.”<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>5</sup> He is probably referring to Robert Creeley, the "Figure of Outward" to whom he dedicated *The Maximus Poems* and of whom he said, "I have learned more from him than from any living man. . . ." *Letters for Origin: 1950-1955*, ed. Albert Glover (London: Cape Goliard, in association with Grossman Publishers, 1968), p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Olson defiantly rejects God (the action is tropic: "turned away / turned") yet acknowledges His veracity and terrible perfection. In his response to hierarchy ("we who throw down hierarchy") he dethrones the father.

<sup>7</sup> Olson was not, it seems, his own best editor. In publishing *In Cold Hell, In Thicket* he relied on Creeley. Creeley's editing of Olson's *Selected Writings* should also be noted because it presents the Olson he finds most useful. For him *Mayan Letters* and "Apollonius of Tyana" are central texts, the latter the pivot of the book. His selection from *The Maximus Poems*, the final section of the book, includes only poems of high merit and, among them, those in which dream materials are conspicuous.

<sup>8</sup> For Olson, much of the excitement is in reading Frances Rose-Troup's *John White: The Patriarch of Dorchester and the Founder of Massachusetts*, a book, Mrs. Rose-Troup notes, that had been seen before publication by Samuel Eliot Morison and not sufficiently acknowledged in his *Builders of the Bay Colony*. In the earlier installment Olson had relied on Morison's graceful but less evidential, less authoritative book for information about the founding and the career of John Smith.

<sup>9</sup> Significantly, also, Kunt Circle. See *Maximus Poems* IV, V, VI, p. 129.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps following Olson, Garland ends *The Gloucester Guide* with a description of this statue and recognition of casualties at sea. For Olson, the memorial's inscription ("They that go down to the sea in ships") may have recalled Pound's opening line.

<sup>11</sup> See also "Pacific Lament," an early poem on death at sea, a poem of turning in which death becomes repose at the source.

<sup>12</sup> I wish to acknowledge my debt to the many scholars who have recently written about Olson, and especially to George F. Butterick for, among other things, his annotations of these poems.

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## CRITICISM / KATHLEEN RAINE

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### The Sign-Making of David Jones

"In the late nineteen-twenties and early 'thirties among my most immediate friends there used to be discussed something that we christened 'The Break.' We did not discover the phenomenon so described; it had been evident in various ways to various people for perhaps a century; it is now, I suppose, apparent to most. Or at least most now see that in the nineteenth century, Western Man moved across a Rubicon which, if as unseen as the 38th parallel, seems to have been as definitive as the Styx."

This statement (written in 1953) from the Introduction to David Jones's *Anathemata* defines his standpoint. With his death in October, 1974, the last English writer of genius who wrote from within European Christendom has taken his place in history. No false hope of revival or recovery